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THE CONGRESS BOOKS : No. 27

HOLY COMMUNION

By J. F. BRISCOE

Rector of Bagborough,

Somerset

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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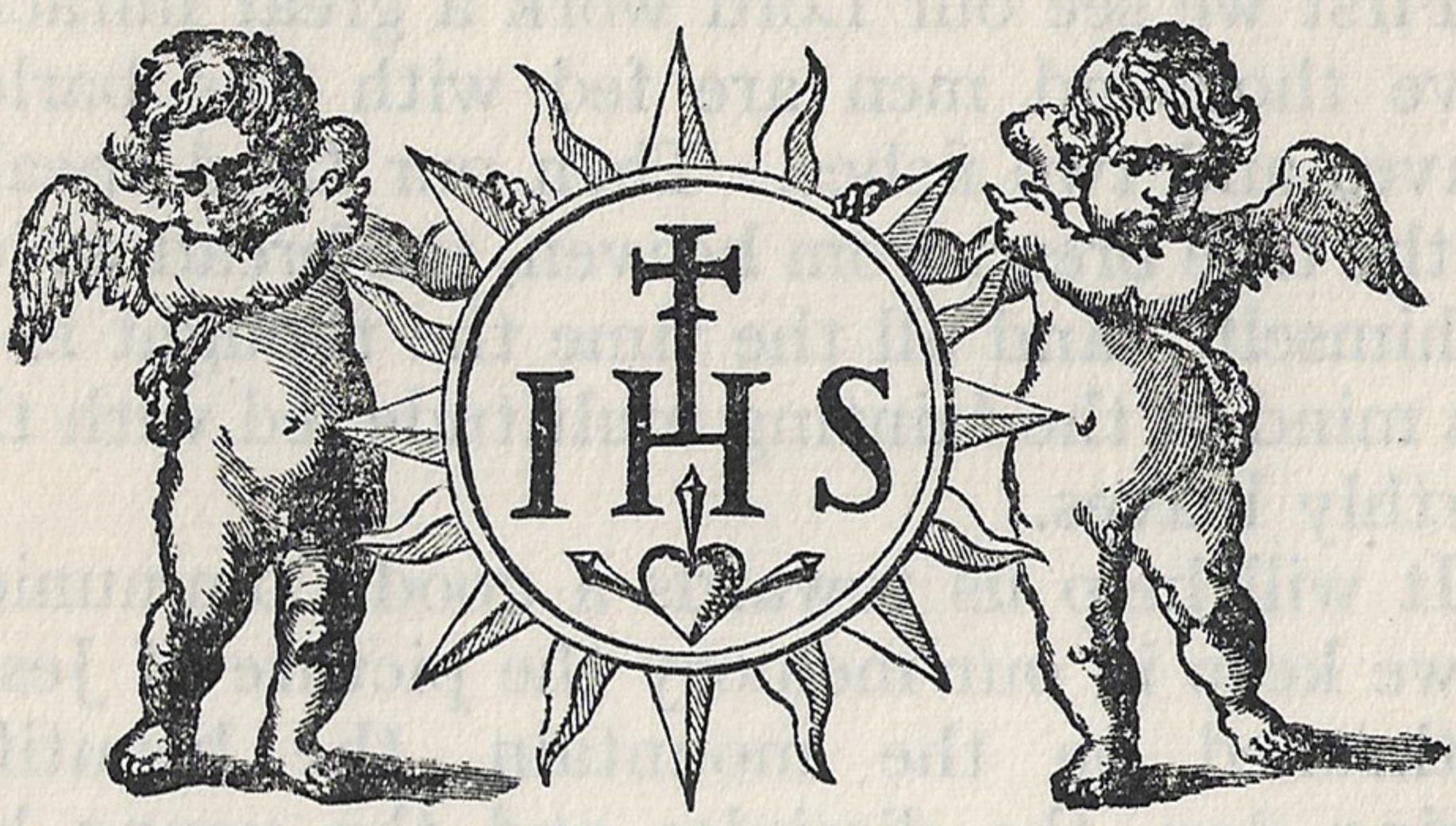

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Holy Communion

IF we desire to understand the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ about the Holy Communion, we shall do well to begin by reading through the sixth chapter of St. John's gospel, where we are told how he prepared his disciples for what he gave them at the Last Supper.

First we see our Lord work a great miracle. Five thousand men are fed with five barley loaves and two fishes. Then our Lord speaks of the true bread from heaven, the bread which is himself; and all the time the thought is in his mind of the fainting multitude fed with the earthly loaves.

It will help us towards a good Communion if we keep in our memory the picture of Jesus enthroned on the mountain, the beautiful spring day, the disciples and the young lad around him, and watch as he gives thanks, and breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples for the people.

We are to lift up our hearts to Jesus because he is our host at the heavenly feast, and we are to remember that the priests are but his ministers to give us what they have received from him.

The dreadful shadows of the death of Christ,

the darkness of the tragic ' night when he was betrayed,' are about every Christian altar.

As well there should be the memory of the sunlit feast where he was happy and beloved, where all men welcomed him, and were joyfully fed with the food from his hands.

Our Lord will have us make no mistake as to the gift we receive in the Holy Communion. 'I am the bread of life,' he says; 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven'; 'the bread that I will give is my flesh'; 'my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed' (*St. John* vi. 35, 51, 55).

When the Jews strove among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' he met their difficulty, not by explaining away his words, but by re-assertion and new emphasis: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you' (*St. John* vi. 53).

Here is St. Matthew's account of the institution of the Holy Communion: 'Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying: "Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins"' (*St. Matt.* xxvi. 26–28).

Here is St. Paul's explanation of the Eucharist: 'The cup of blessing which we bless, is

it not the communion of the blood of Christ ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ ? ' (1 *Cor.* x. 16).

The essential action in the Eucharist is the consecration. The priest says the words of Jesus in his name, and by the power of the Holy Ghost the bread and wine become his body and blood. Under the forms of bread and wine is present Jesus himself, God and Man : and he is present that he may be ' our spiritual food and sustenance in this holy sacrament.' He is present in a heavenly and spiritual manner to which we have no parallel in our experience, and which we cannot understand ; but we are sure of the fact of his presence because of his plain words, and because this has been the belief of the universal Church from the first. We are sure, too, because of our own experience, which is also the experience of multitudes of good people in every age, that in the Holy Sacrament we find our Lord. We cannot see him or hear his voice, but such sight and hearing would add nothing to the completeness of his real presence wherever the Holy Sacrament is.

Jesus is here with us,
  Jesus is here !
Earth fades in mist away,
  Heaven's gate is near :
Doubt not, sad heart, nor fear,
For thy dear Lord is here,
  Jesus is here.

'I AM the true vine. Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch and is withered; and men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned' (*St. John* xv. 1, 4–6).

So our Lord teaches us what is to be our relation to him. Sometimes he calls us to be his followers, his disciples, his friends; now he tells us that we must be united to him. He will be content with no less intimate relation. He desires that we shall be one with him as he is one with the Father (*St. John* xvii. 21); that we shall share one life with him as the branch shares the life of the vine.

The chief instrument of our union with Jesus is the Holy Communion.

We remember the principle which underlies the sacraments. They are the application and the extension of the Incarnation: they are the means of bringing home to each individual the benefit which was bestowed by Christ upon our race. In Baptism the Holy Ghost puts each separate child born in sin into touch with the Saviour; in the Eucharist the Holy Ghost so changes the bread and wine that the communicants are made partakers of the Saviour's life.

6 Our Need of Jesus

As we receive the flesh and blood of Jesus, our mortal nature (it has been well said) 'is quickened by the seed of a higher life': and here and now our nature is exalted by union with God.

'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father; so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me' (*St. John* vi. 56, 57). The consequence of union with Jesus is that already we have eternal life. Already we are lifted up to the heavenly places to dwell with him.

Our life is hid with Christ in God. When the priest gives us Communion, he says 'The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.' United with Jesus Christ, we dwell in him and he dwells in us; 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (*Galat.* ii. 20). 'If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever': 'whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life' (*St. John* vi. 51, 54).

When I consider how great and wonderful is the gift offered to me in this holy sacrament, I am inclined to say to myself that I cannot dare to receive it.

Who am I that I should take on my lips the body of Christ, and drink of the cup of his precious blood? Who am I that I should be

united with God? that Jesus should come to dwell in my heart?

I think of my many sins, my neglect of God, my pride, my self-indulgence, my unfaithfulness, my ingratitude. It is right that the remembrance of sin should keep me from heedless approach to the holy table; but my very weakness and imperfection is the ground of my desperate need for the healing power of the heavenly food.

Holy Communion is not a luxury for the few; it is a necessity for all. There is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. In him alone is life: apart from him is only death.

The Catechism of the Church of England tells us that, with Baptism, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is 'generally necessary for salvation': that is, necessary for all.

Everywhere in the Church the faithful are bound to receive Communion at Easter: in the Church of England the rule is that all shall receive three times in the year, of which Easter is to be one.

These Church rules interpret for us our Lord's most solemn words: 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you' (*St. John* vi. 53).

The usual practice of the Church has been that Confirmation shall precede Communion: this is the rule of the Church of England to-day

If I have been confirmed, the way to Communion is open for me. The words of Christ

the practice of the Church, the needs of my own soul, unite in bidding me draw near. Here is strength for my weakness, here is refreshment for my weariness, here amid the hazards and sorrows of life, is my hope and security and joy. The holy table is spread : my Saviour is waiting to welcome me.

THE holy sacrament of the altar has ever been honoured as the central treasure of the Church on earth.

The first Christians were accustomed to receive Communion every day (*Acts* ii. 42, 46) ; and when this was no longer possible, it became at once the rule that the disciples should meet on the first day of the week for the 'Breaking of the Bread,' which was a name for the altar service (*Acts* xx. 7, 11). For centuries all who were present were accustomed to receive Communion with the priest, unless they were especially forbidden to do so because of serious sin. Communion was given not only to adults, but to children as well : and this is the custom now in the churches of the East.

In the ages of persecution, when it was against the law to be a Christian, nothing was more characteristic of the faithful than their love for the Holy Sacrament. The first writer

who undertook the defence of Christianity against the heathen was careful to explain in his 'Apology' how Christians met on Sunday for the Eucharist, and were taught to believe that the bread and wine they received were the flesh and blood of Jesus, the Son of God. (Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 65-67.)

Though they did so at the peril of their lives, the Christians never failed to meet for the Eucharist, either in private houses or in caverns underground, such as you may still see in Rome. When they were questioned by the heathen judges about these unlawful assemblies, they would say: 'The Lord's Service cannot possibly be dropped': 'We cannot do without the Lord's Service' (Mason, *Historic Martyrs*, pp. 406–415).

Holy Communion was given in the prisons to the Christians awaiting torture and death, and they welcomed it as their greatest consolation, and the source of all their strength. Lay people were allowed to keep the Holy Sacrament in their houses that they might not be deprived of the Bread of Life. The boys who served the altar were sent with the body of Christ after Mass for the sick and absent. One such lad, named Tarcisius, was met by a band of soldiers as he was about this holy errand. He would not give up what he bore, and they beat him till he died, still with his secret safe. 'He chose,' said the epitaph cut over his grave, 'rather to lay down his life

than to betray that heavenly body to mad dogs' (Mason, *Historic Martyrs*, p. 195).

The central purpose of every magnificent cathedral, of every beautiful church, is simply to provide a shelter for an altar whereon the body of Christ may be offered and adored, and where the faithful may receive him in Communion.

IF I am to make a good Communion, I must prepare my body and my soul. It was the custom in the early Church to receive the Holy Communion fasting whatever the hour of reception might be; and this rule binds us still, except we are in such serious sickness as to be in danger of death. We must abstain from all food and drink after midnight on the day before we make our Communion.

The preparation of the soul is of much greater importance. I must come 'holy and clean' to the heavenly feast. I must repent. I must ask God to make me very sorry for my sins: if I am indeed very sorry all the rest of my repentance will be easy. I must resolve to give up my sins, and to serve God better. I must, so far as I can, put right any matter in which I have wronged my neighbour; thus, if I have injured his reputation

or stolen his money I must do what I can to repair the injury.

When there is serious sin on the conscience, we ought to make our confession to God with a priest to help us; then, by means of the priest's absolution, God will restore us to cleanness and purity. If there is no very serious sin on our conscience, it still is good to go to Confession; because so we shall be perfectly certain that our hearts are ready for the coming of Christ, and we shall win the special grace which the sacrament of Penance brings.

Always before going to Communion we should try to spend some time—at least ten minutes—in praying to God in our own words. There is so much for us to pray about. We adore his majesty: we ask him to look on us, to pity us, to heal us, to comfort us, to strengthen us. We ask him to purify and enlighten us by the Holy Spirit, that our Lord when he comes may find in us a mansion prepared for himself.

On the morning of your Communion it is important to be present in church in good time. When you go up to the altar, kneel with your head erect for the priest to place the body of Christ on your tongue: or hold your right hand open on your left hand under your chin. Do not touch the bowl of the cup, but if it is necessary to guide it to your lips, grasp very gently its base. Do not leave the altar

rail until the person next to you has received.

Then go back to your place and thank God in your own words.

This is one of the holiest moments in your life. God can do nothing greater for you than he has done now. He has given his Son to be your food.

Jesus has come to you. All barriers are cleared away between him and you ; between his heart and your heart. Welcome him and love him : 'My Lord and my God !' Thank him for his goodness. Promise to be true to him till you die. Ask him to keep you from sin. Speak to him for those dear to you, for the living and the dead : for the whole Church : for your parish : for the missionaries : for the conversion of England : for the conversion of the world.

After your Communion, often return to the remembrance of him whom you have received. Your Communion ought to make you a champion of Jesus Christ ; you must show yourself boldly on his side. You must do all you can to bring others to his service.

Just as Mary brought blessing and peace to Elizabeth, when she visited her, because she was the mother of God, so you are meant to be a messenger of blessing and peace, in your home, in your workshop, about the farm, wherever you go, because you bear with you Jesus reigning in your heart.

IN the year 734 the Venerable Bede, the first historian of the English Church, wrote a letter of counsel to St. Ecgbert, the archbishop of York. He reminds the archbishop of the excellent practice of the Church of Christ in Italy, Gaul, Africa, and the whole of the East, where the faithful every day partake of the body and blood of the Lord: and regrets that even the more religious among the English do not come to Communion except on Christmas Day, the Epiphany, and Easter. Ecgbert should exhort them to communicate more frequently, at any rate on Sundays and the festivals of the Saints, as was the custom in the holy and apostolic church of Rome.

It is probable that daily Communion was not in fact so prevalent as Bede thought, but his counsel is exactly what is needed to-day. It is excellent to go to Communion every morning, after the example of the first Christians. All who desire to serve God well should aim at Communion every week, or at least every month.

But it is better to communicate rarely, even only once a year, and then to communicate with reverence and love, than to do so frequently with bad sin on the conscience and no love in the heart.

COMMUNION PRAYERS

For the week before Communion

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.

But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

For the week after Communion

Almighty and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee, for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us, who have duly received these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ; and dost assure us thereby of thy favour and goodness towards us; and that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy ever-

lasting kingdom, by the merits of the most precious death and passion of thy dear Son.

And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

M Y L O V I N G J E S U S

I give thee my heart; and I consecrate
myself wholly to thee, out of the
grateful love I bear thee, and
as a reparation for all my
unfaithfulness to grace;
and with thine aid
I purpose never
t o s i n
again.

GLORIA
ET LAUS

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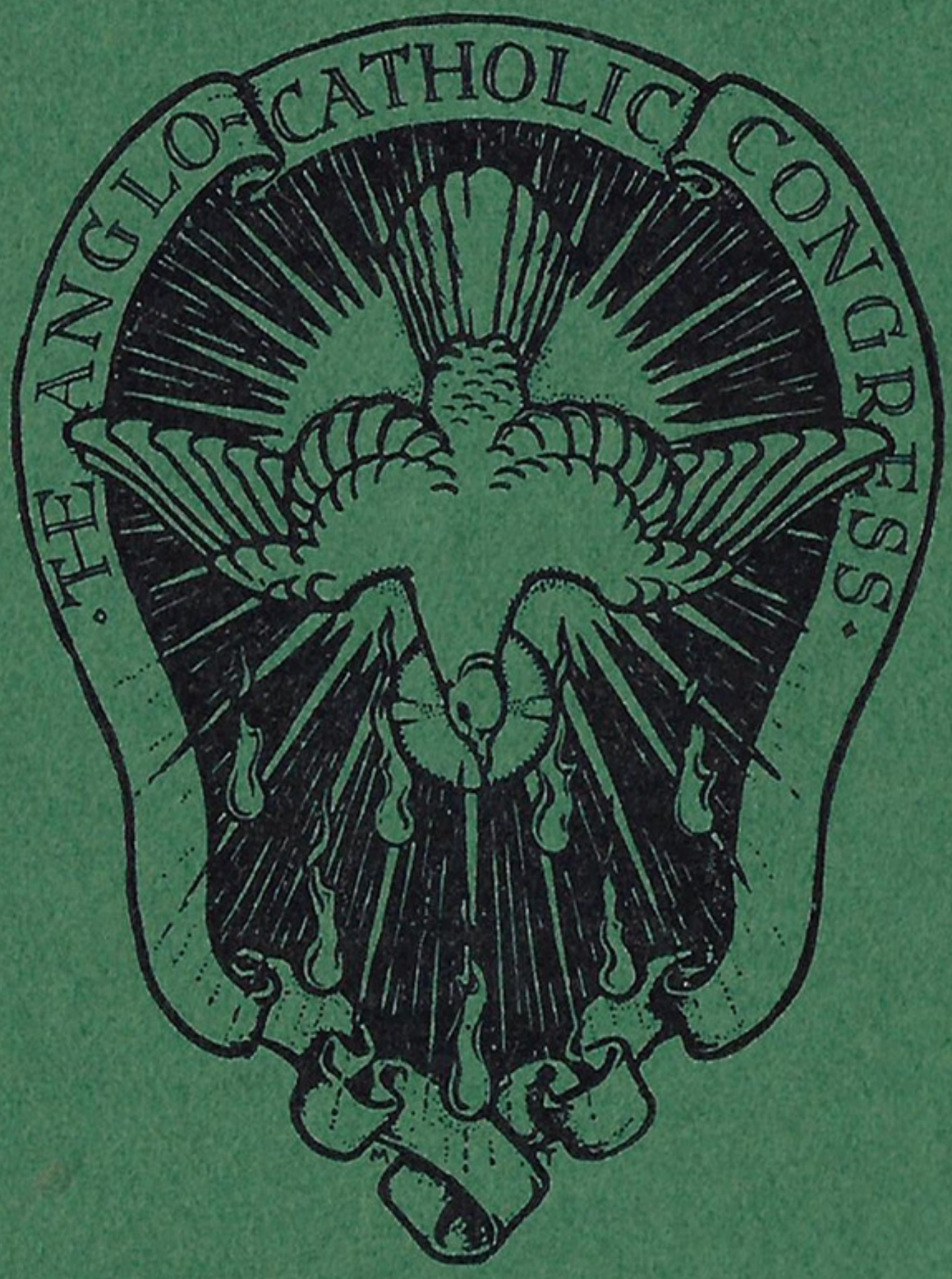

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